THE LEE MANSION

MARBLEHEAD, MASS.

1768



The Lee Mansion

WHAT IT WAS AND WHAT IT IS

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of the Marblehead Historical Society

"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set"
(*Proverbs 22: 28*)

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LEE MANSION, MARBLEHEAD, MASS.

It was in the year 1768 that Col. Jeremiah Lee, a wealthy merchant, then at the height of his prosperity, laid the foundation of his princely home among the rocks of the little fishing and commercial port of Marblehead.

Fashioned as it was, after the homes of his ancestors, it needed but the hawthorne and the hedgerows to transport one to old England, and indeed the very timbers of which it was framed were grown in the mother country. Built at a cost of over ten thousand pounds, it could hardly be rivaled throughout the whole province of Massachusetts Bay—and overshadowing, with its grandeur, the humble home of the fisher folk, no wonder it became to them the "Mansion," and the "Lee Mansion" it has always been, the pride of the whole town.

Squarely it stood upon the main highway of the little town—its three storied height surmounted by a cupola which was a veritable watch tower overlooking the harbor and bay where the great merchant ships could be seen



MAIN STAIRCASE, LEFT



PANEL IN UPPER HALL

coming and going on their journey from foreign ports, and a brilliant spectacle it must have been for its time, with the candle light streaming from its many checkered paned windows, on nights when there were great doings at the mansion; for Colonel Lee and his wife, mistress Martha, were hospitable people, noted for their generosity and public spirit. But if the outside was imposing and beautiful, greater beauties greeted the eye when once you crossed the threshold.

Mounting the broad freestone steps of its pillared portico, the clang of its shining brass knocker opens the door to us and we stand in the broad front hall, held speechless as we gaze at its great proportions. Extending the length of the house, nearly sixteen feet in width, its massive doors, its mahogany wainscotting, its wide, low stepping staircase, with finely carved mahogany railing leading up to a landing where a seat, beneath a cathedral window flanked by Corinthian columns, tempts one to stop and gaze on the garden below; and its walls hung with panelled paper, telling, by pictured story and emblem, the his-



MAIN ENTRANCE

tory of some by-gone day, all prove it to be the center of attraction of the whole house. On the right of the hall is the dining-room, its panelled wainscotting, carved frieze and fireplace of panels bordered by these same carved Corinthian columns, being all of white. The gravity hinge on its swinging door is rare



MAIN STAIRCASE

and valuable, also the removable brasses which cover its large H hinges. On the left is the large banqueting or state dining-room, originally in natural pine, panelled from floor to ceiling, its mantel being a marvel of beauty, with rich carving of fruit and flowers, of Gibbons type, festooning a central panel containing, it is said, a painting of such value that it sold, in later years, for three thousand dollars. Leading from this room is the library or office with windows looking into the garden, while hidden behind the panelling of the fireplace are the double iron doors of a safe, built into the chimney, where the family silver and valuables could be safely hidden in case of sudden alarm.

Across the hall, at the rear, is the kitchen. Here doors to right and left open, one on the hall of the side entrance to the house, the other to a passage leading to the cook house and slave quarters, a brick building on the east whose lower story sheltered the family coach, while above slept the slaves; for Colonel Lee had many who were kept busy loading and unloading his vessels, as

they came into port. That cooking was done in some outer kitchen or cook house is evident from the size and build of the oven in this family kitchen, which could hardly roast a turkey, let alone the loaves of bread, pots of beans and puddings which made up a baking in those days. It rather served to keep the dishes warm for the family table.

On the second floor the same proportions and beauties are found as below. The large state chamber over the banqueting room and the smaller one over the dining-room, both show the panelled wainscotting, carved friezes and pictured paper, while recessed windows with broad window seats, panelled shutters with H and L hinges, shining brass knobs and escutcheons and tiled fireplaces abound in all the rooms, of which there are four, besides two small dressing rooms and a large linen closet or press leading off one of the rear rooms.

In the kitchen chamber half of a double closet door opens on a small staircase leading to a room above which was evidently the nursery, since the door at the top has no latch and could not be opened from the children's side. It furnished a short cut from the mother's room, thus avoiding cold hallways.



MAIN STAIRCASE, SHOWING OVAL WINDOW

On the third floor one passage runs north and south, the other east and west. The walls here are covered with papers of a Chinese design.

Two large chambers open on the first passage, the south one having recessed windows and tiled fireplace, the north, while lacking the recessed windows, has a small dressing room leading from it. On the easterly passage two small rooms open with no visible means of heating, while the passage ends at



BANQUET ROOM

the back staircase. Two rear rooms remain on this floor, the nursery over the kitchen chamber—it is to this room that the small staircase leads—and an inner lumber or trunk room. The back staircase, with panelled wainscotting and carved rails its entire length, leads down to the side or easterly entrance to the house and opens on the yard, where the date of the building, 1768, is set in white cobble stones, among the grey stones of the paving, which as well

as the broad granite steps were religiously scrubbed every Saturday by later occupants of the house. This cobbled side yard steadied the coach and the two-wheel chaise when family or guests were alighting.

Our tour of the building is not complete without a trip to the tower or "Cupola."

Up a short flight of steps on the easterly passage a small landing and then a little winding staircase brings us to the tower, where six small cathedral windows overlook not only the harbor and bay but the whole town scattered as it was among the rocks and under the headlands. On our way down, an open door into the attic shows us the solid framework of the house from its hand-hewn beams and rafters held together by wooden dowels, and its two huge chimneys, while its English construction is shown by the windows, thrown in instead of outside the building, reflecting light from the windows of the hall below. Even the cellar is interesting in this old mansion with its floor paved in some intricate zig-zag pattern and its brick arches forming huge store closets and many a barrel and bale from foreign port must have ended its journey here.

And this is the Lee Mansion as it was in those Colonial days when the great rooms echoed with laughter and music and the waxen tapers shone on men in short clothes, silver buckles and gold lace, women in trailing brocades, powder, puffs and rare laces, and the negro servants coming and going on many a household errand.

But Jeremiah Lee had not long to enjoy his beautiful home, for even then there were rumors of troubles to come and when, in a year or two, such questions as the "Boston Port Bill," "Undue Taxation" and the "Tea" question were agitating the little town, while storms at sea wrought disaster to the fleets. there were hard times among its people, and Jeremiah Lee was taking an active part in all its affairs.

When with Col. Azor Orne he was elected to the Continental Congress, he, with Orne, was obliged to decline, owing to the great expense, and Elbridge Gerry was then sent at the town's expense, afterward becoming Vice-President of the United States.

(1.) Our late townsman J. H. Orne, Esq., speaks thus of Lee: "As moderator of important town meetings, as town officer in various capacities, as representative in the 'General Court' and as a member of the province 'Committee of Safety and Supplies' he rendered faithful public service."

Elbridge Gerry and Azor Orne were also members of the same important

(1.) From "Deeds of Our Ancestors," by J. H. Orne, Esq. Printed in The Messenger, 1875.



KITCHEN FIREPLACE

committee and having attended one of its meetings held at Weatherby's Black Horse Tavern, in Cambridge, on the 18th of April, 1775, the three members from Marblehead, being considerable distance from home, resolved to spend the night there. It was during that night that eight hundred British soldiers started for Lexington and Concord. Reaching Cambridge, the battalion halted while a detachment was sent to capture the three "rebels." Aroused from their slumbers and warned of their danger, they hurriedly left the house and escaped across the fields leaving their clothing behind. The detachment departed after an unsuccessful search, the battalion moving on, the three patriots left their place of concealment and recovered their clothing. It is said that Lee never recovered from the illness contracted by this exposure, and now, when his abilities and experience were of great importance to his country, his friends were summoned to his dying bed at his "country seat in Newbury" where he breathed his last just three weeks after his narrow escape at Cambridge. Thus died one of the earliest martyrs to the patriot cause, never forgetting his coun-



STATE CHAMBER

try or its needs while sense remained, for it is said that one of the last acts of his life, was to provide a legacy in his will of five thousand pounds for the "Province Treasury."

Our late Historian Roads says—

(2.) "The death of this eminent patriot at a time when his inestimable services were of more value than ever to the town and province, was universally lamented."

In the various positions of trust and honor which he had held, as an enterprising and successful merchant, and as an "ardent, active, and able advocate for the Liberties and Independence of his Country," he inspired the confidence and esteem of all who knew him. In his private intercourse with his fellowmen, he was admired for the urbanity of his manners, and beloved for his generous disposition and benevolence to the poor.

He was buried in the church yard of the New Meeting House (Unitarian)

(2.) "History and Traditions of Marblehead," by Samuel Roads, Jr.

in Marblehead, where his tomb may still be seen. Colonel Lee married in 1745 Miss Martha Swett of Marblehead and eight children were born to them, descendants of whom are being heard from in different parts of the country. Life size portraits of Colonel Lee and his wife, painted by the famous Copley, now hang in the Art Museum in Boston.

But the doors of the mansion were not closed by Mistress Lee on the death of her husband, but were ever open to the townspeople. Washington on his visit to the town in 1781 was entertained at lunch here, while Marquis De Lafayette, the friend of Washington, also enjoyed the hospitality of the great house in 1784 and 1824, and Historian Roads tells us that "President Monroe received here the hospitality of the citizens, and here Andrew Jackson shook the hands of the sturdy fishermen, who almost worshipped the old hero, and were so true to him through life."

Col. William Raymond Lee, of Revolutionary fame, the nephew of Jeremiah Lee, made his home here later, with his aunt, assisting her in the care of the estate. In the final settlement the house came into the possession of Chief Jus-



FRONT CHAMBER, THIRD FLOOR



GUEST CHAMBER, THIRD FLOOR

tice Sewall, who sold it in 1804 to the Marblehead Bank. For over a hundred years one of the front rooms, and later the others, were used as banking rooms, and the various cashiers have reared their large families here.

The front door has always been open to visitors to view its fine old staircase and hall, while many a social event has taken place in the upper rooms, the later occupants of the house carrying out the same hospitable ideas as the original owners.

What the mansion was in the days of the Lees, it practically is today in build, if not in purpose.

"Across its antique portico" still falls the shadows of the elms, while its broad freestone steps have been worn smooth with the tread of many feet, some on business intent, others to view the old mansion, for scarcely a visitor to Marblehead has been allowed to depart without this inspection.

On May 9, 1898, the Marblehead Historical Society was organized, its members being the trustees past and present of Abbot Public Library. Its first



BACK STAIRCASE, LOOKING BACK

collection was placed in the library. In August, 1899, its first loan exhibition was held, and a wealth of articles of rare historic value was brought out from the homes of the town, many of them brought from foreign ports by the merchant men of the town, and held as treasures by their descendants. When the



PANEL, ARCH OF VESPASIAN

exhibition ended, so many of these articles had been given to the society that a room was rented of the Young Men's Christian Association in the "King Hooper Mansion," where the exhibition had been held. But the close of the year found the collection increased from one hundred to two and larger quarters were needed, so on November 1, 1900, the society removed to the brick building next door to the mansion, formerly the slave quarters. Remaining here for nine years, the collection reached into the second thousand, and membership increased as well. Being again overcrowded, and feeling that could they have some historic building with more room for display many of the larger articles of furniture held by families in the town might come into the care of the society, and living next door to the Lee Mansion, our eyes turned longingly toward it. Knowing the place that it held in the hearts of the townspeople, and that it could be purchased, it was thought wise to arouse public interest in that direction. Accordingly in August, 1907, a second loan exhibition was held in Abbot Hall and "The Lee Mansion" became our slogan. At the close of this exhibition, lasting one week, we had with gifts from sons and

daughters of Marblehead living out of the town about seven hundred dollars toward buying that or some other building and had at least turned public sentiment in that direction. Later when the building fell under the auctioneer's hammer, for three thousand five hundred dollars, and it was rumored that the fine old mansion was to be ruthlessly shorn of its carving and beautiful staircase, it seemed like an act of desecration to the townspeople, and a few ladies of the society started out on a crusade to see what could be done to reclaim the old landmark. As a result a very enthusiastic meeting of the society was held and it was unanimously voted to purchase the building, from the buyers at the auction, for fifty-five hundred dollars, the price then given.

A soliciting committee was appointed to canvass the town and gifts came in from young and old, in town and out, resident and summer visitors. Three thousand dollars was raised in this way, the rest being given on mortgage. New members came in by the hundred and on July 9, 1909, we came into possession of the building. Repairs were begun at once and the doors thrown open to the public. It was the purpose of the society to keep the mansion as nearly as possible as it was originally, so partitions were taken down, old papers reproduced, fireplaces opened up and retiled, rooms painted and papered as needed; the fine old imported paper, being in good preservation after one hundred and forty years of use and disuse, was cleaned and repaired and the rooms were gradually filled with the rare old furniture which began to come in. The garden which was not included in the sale of the building was next added to our possessions and a "Friendship" border started here. Since the purchase of the mansion visitors by the thousands have flocked to its doors each year from every state and country, many returning to bring others with them. Artists have raved over its beauties and architects begged to copy its ingenious carvings and decorations.

Its historical collection, numbering now over seven thousand, includes not only documents, china, portraits, embroidery, and the products of Chippendale and Hepplethwaite, but the various industries of the town, from early years, are represented, and many miscellaneous articles pertaining to the town's history have their home here.

The house is open each day from early spring until late fall, and on Saturdays during the entire year. The small admission fee which is charged, the sale of souvenirs and annual dues with an occasional entertainment or educational exhibition is helping to pay its running expenses. The past year owing to enlarged work and increased expense, a new system of membership was established, providing for three classes—Active, Sustaining and Life members. Any person donating one hundred dollars becomes a Patron of the society, while the

gift of one thousand dollars, by will or otherwise, makes one a Benefactor whose name is inscribed on a tablet displayed on the walls of the mansion.

Jeremiah Lee builded better than he knew when he placed his home in the heart of the little town, and the reclaimed mansion stands today a monument not only of the early prosperity of the town, but a reminder to young and old of Lee and others of his day, who gave of their best to their town and their country. As it was "the pride and wonder of their day" it is still the joy and "admiration of our own."

BENEFACTORS *of the* MARBLEHEAD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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